

Family, Friends, and Cemeteries



Office of State Archaeology staff undertaking rescue archeology of the Walton family burial ground exposed by sand and gravel mining. The vertical face cut of the quarrying operations precluded in situ preservation of this late- 18th-century cemetery.

Upon the accidental discovery of human skeletal remains, archeologists are often confronted with a harsh and critical public. Reaction to the archeological treatment of exposed osteological remains often ranges from emotional distress to vocal hostility. Rarely do archeologists encounter a disinterested public in these unfortunate and sensitive situations.

The discovery in 1990 of the unmarked late 18th-century Walton Family Cemetery in rural Griswold, Connecticut, by a sand and gravel operation represents a positive case study in this regard. The Connecticut State Archaeologist and the State Historic Preservation Office initially focused upon the archeological removal and analysis of the endangered burials. However, face-to-face interaction with several interested “publics” quickly revealed the various perspectives and emotional concerns which must be accommodated to successfully resolve burial-related discoveries.

For most burial discovery situations, interested parties include the property owner, concerned neighbors, family members of the deceased, state and local government officials, Native American tribal governments, and the religious community. Diplomacy, sincerity, and sensitivity are required to understand their variant viewpoints and to address their diverse personal and professional concerns.

For the Walton Family Cemetery, the property owner’s primary worries were the appearance of his culpability for disturbing, albeit accidentally, these historic burials and a fear of economic consequences. Subsequent research indicated that the cemetery had been marked with a single crude gravestone dating to 1754; had lacked enclosing fieldstone walls or wood fencing; had been obscured by years of extensive overgrowth; and had not been noted as a result of the town’s planning and zoning requirement to title search only the past 40 years of the property. Clearly, the disturbance and discovery were accidental, rather

than a deliberate “oversight” for economic gain (sand and gravel). Resolved of the perception of grievous fault and reassured that Connecticut law absolved private citizens of monetary responsibilities, the property owner generously donated cash, construction equipment, erected a temporary protective structure, and most importantly, voluntarily ceased his gravel operations for a longer period than required by Connecticut statute. This provided suffi-





The use of brass tacks, which note the deceased's initials and age at death, was a common decorative treatment in late 18th-century Connecticut. Brass-related mineralization enhanced the preservation of the coffin lid.

cient opportunity for the State Archaeologist to professionally rescue all of the burials in this small rural farm-family cemetery.

After confirmation by the State Archaeologist that the disturbed burials were in fact in a historic cemetery, the Office of the State Medical Examiner and the Connecticut State Police willingly relinquished their statutory involvement. Similarly, the Town of Griswold's Office of Selectmen appreciated the State Historic Preservation Office's periodic updates as to the rescue archeology, allowing local officials to more effectively respond to concerned community members. The town's health officer also welcomed the professional coordination and shared osteological knowledge about his community. Keeping community officials properly informed was imperative for establishing a professional working relationship which minimized bureaucratic entanglements. For instance, the town's health officer concurred with the Office of State Archaeologist's evaluation that the ceme-

tery's age obviated modern reinterment requirements for coffins and concrete vaults, the cost of which would have posed significant difficulties for reburial.

Adjoining neighbors and local residents were sympathetic to the professional archeological removal of the burials upon reassurance from the archeological community that all osteological remains would be reburied.

The archeological rescue commenced immediately after the initial site inspection revealed both exposed skeletal and coffin remains and the extensive instability of the half-excavated sand and gravel knoll. While the property owner attempted to forestall further erosion by stabilizing the vertical bank with additional sand and gravel, the Public Archaeology Survey Team Inc., under the direction of Dr. Kevin McBride, established a grid system across the site. Volunteer field assistance was generously provided by students from the University of Connecticut and avocational archeologists from the Archaeological Society of Connecticut and the Albert Morgan Archaeological Society. Paul Seldzik and Allison Webb Wilcox of the National Museum of Health and Medicine, Armed Forces Institute of Pathology (Washington, DC) offered their technical assistance and laboratory facilities for osteological analysis.

Skeletal analysis has yielded a bimodal pattern of age distribution consisting of young children and old adults. Of the 27 burials, 14 were subadults, including 6 infants under the age of 2 years. The 13 adult individuals include 6 individuals over 50 years of age. This mortuary pattern suggests a historic population which reflects a relatively normal life table distribution.

As rescue archeological studies were proceeding, concurrent research was undertaken of local archival sources including the town land records in order to identify this rural family burying ground. A 1757 property transfer associated the cemetery with the Nathaniel Walton family. The State Archaeologist, who in Connecticut bears the responsibility for notifying possible descendants, coordinated with the Griswold Historical Society and the Connecticut Genealogical Society to identify surviving relatives of this old New England farming family.

Walton family members were eventually contacted in Massachusetts, New York, Maryland, Nevada, Arkansas, and California. At first, family members were distressed that their historic family burying ground had been exposed and was further threatened by sand and gravel mining. However, as discussion ensued, family members came to understand and appreciate that the intent of the responsible archeologists was to handle the osteological and cultural remains in a respectful and

A Congregational Church reburial service was conducted by Rev. Michael Beynon with numerous Walton family members in attendance. The Town of Griswold provided reburial space in the Hopeville Cemetery, which was contemporaneous with the historic Walton burial ground.



professional manner, that their input was both encouraged and vital, and that the situation offered a rare opportunity to gain insights about their early New England ancestors. Family members volunteered genealogical information, photographs, and even hair samples so that the contemporary genetic record could be compared with on-going DNA analysis of the skeletal remains.

In the fall of 1992, a reburial ceremony was conducted for the 18th-century Walton family members who had been archeologically rescued from their historic resting place. Since archival evidence demonstrated that the Walton family had belonged to the First Congregational Church in the Town of Griswold, current church members graciously hosted a reception for Walton relatives who attended from as far away as Nevada. At the invitation of the First Congregational Church, the State Archaeologist shared his preliminary analysis of the historic and archeological data with family, friends, and church members. The Rev. Michael Beynon performed a traditional Puritan ceremony of reinterment at the nearby town-owned Hopeville Cemetery. The reburial in this historic cemetery, which was contemporaneous with the Walton cemetery, was arranged by the town's first Selectman. Skeletal remains were arranged according to the archeological excavation records such that the integrity of rows, body

orientation, and relative positions were re-established.

The Walton Cemetery project triggered a number of very sensitive and emotional concerns from a diverse constituency. Property owners, town and state officials, archeologists, community residents, family members, and religious representatives participated and shared in the decisionmaking process regarding the respectful removal and subsequent reburial of the Walton family remains. Connecticut statutes provided the administrative guidelines while the archeological community offered the sensitivity, diplomacy, and professionalism required for dealing with both the endangered osteological population and their surviving descendants and other interested parties. Or in the words of Rev. Michael Beynon, "the respect and sensitivity shown by the archeologists during the reburial made my work dealing with family and congregational members a lot easier."

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